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**TITLE OF THE INVENTION**

Sub A1 > NETWORK SYSTEM

#### CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This is a Continuation of Application

5 PCT/JP99/05290, filed September 28, 1999.

This application is based upon and claims the benefit of priority from the prior Japanese Patent Application No. 10-274082, filed September 28, 1998, the entire contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

## BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a network system such as the Internet and, more particularly, to user authentication required when a user connects with a network.

Recently, electronic mail, information providing service, and network shopping using the Internet have been widely performed in accordance with the widespread use of personal computers and the maintenance and expansion of network environment.

A user has to connect a user terminal to the Internet in order to send and receive e-mail, browse information, and do network shopping. It is however difficult for the user to directly connect the user terminal to the Internet. Usually he or she connects the terminal thereto through an access point of an Internet service provider.

The above connection states will be described with reference to FIG. 1. Access points (APS) 4A<sub>1</sub>, 4A<sub>2</sub>, ...; 4B<sub>1</sub>, ... proper to Internet service providers (ISPs) 6A, 6B, ... are connected to the Internet 2.

5 In most cases, the Internet connect rate depends on connect time regardless of distance, whereas the connect rate between an access point AP and a user terminal is based on an ordinary telephone charge system. It is thus general that the access point AP

10 is located for each area (area code) in order to lower a user charge. The Internet service provider ISP is constituted of an authentication server, a mail server, a domain name server, a gateway and the like. A WWW server 10 for providing a home page is also connected

15 to the Internet 2.

The access points APS have a function of connecting user terminals 8A<sub>1</sub>, 8A<sub>2</sub>, ..., which make a contract with their respective providers, to the Internet 2. If an access request is issued from a user terminal,

20 the provider performs authentication using the authentication server to determine whether the user who is gaining access to the Internet is a regular one or not under contract with the provider. The user terminals 8A<sub>1</sub>, 8A<sub>2</sub>, ... under contract can be connected to the

25 Internet through the access points 4A<sub>1</sub>, 4A<sub>2</sub>, ..., whereas they cannot be done through the access point 4B<sub>1</sub> of Internet service provider 6B because they do not

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contract themselves to the provider 6B.

Recently, various types of portable user terminal have been developed. Not only a user uses a terminal fixedly installed in an office, but also he or she sometimes wish to get access to the Internet using a portable terminal even when he or she is out or on a business trip. If there are no access points of an Internet service provider to which a user makes a contract near the user, he or she has to connect his or her terminal to the Internet through a remote access point. Since, in this case, a telephone charge increases, the user wishes to temporarily utilize an access point of another nearby Internet service provider to connect with the Internet. Even though an access point of an Internet service provider to which a user makes a contract is near the user, if the access point is busy, he or she wishes to temporarily utilize an access point of another Internet service provider to connect with the Internet. The Internet connection capabilities of Internet service providers are not uniform but vary from provider to provider. It is thus desired that an Internet service provider be selected according to its intended use. When an access point of an Internet service provider to which a user makes a contract is busy, it is sometimes preferable that the user temporarily uses an access point of another Internet service provider.

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CONVENTIONALLY, in order to count the above problem, each user had to contract with a few Internet service providers on an individual basis and pay a basic rate for each provider regardless of whether it was used or not, which became a significant economical burden to the user. What a user contracts with a plurality of Internet service providers means that a plurality of user IDs (electronic mail addresses) and a plurality of passwords are set. In addition to the economical problem, there were a number of inconveniences in which a user had to set a user terminal (dialup connection) for each Internet service provider and could not manage the mail in a batch because of a plurality of mail addresses.

In a conventional electronic mail address, as shown in FIG. 2, alphanumerics X02AT4375 were arranged as a user name before a domain name PATENT.COM (to the left of the @ sign) in accordance with the provisions of an Internet service provider. Such an unfamiliar, hard-to-remember user name was automatically added to the mail address. Though a user name can be registered as he or she wishes, if the same user name has been registered, the user has to prepare another user name and register it again, which is a very troublesome operation.

An object of the present invention is to provide a network system in which a user is able to connect

with a network selectively using access points of a number of Internet service providers only if the user contracts with one Internet service provider.

Another object of the present invention is to  
5 provide an Internet connection apparatus capable of connecting with a network by performing user authentication even at the request of not only a regular user contracting with a provider but also a user contracting with another provider cooperating with the provider of  
10 the regular user.

Still another object of the present invention is to provide an electronic mail address determination system capable of providing a user with an electronic mail address including a user name as the user wishes.

15 BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In a network system according to the present invention comprising a plurality of individual service providers each having own access points, and a parallel service provider connected to the plurality of individual service providers and including an authentication server, when the access point of the individual service providers receives a connection request from a user who contracts with the parallel service provider, the individual service provider causes the authentication server to perform user authentication and connect the user to a network through the access point in accordance with a result of the

authentication.

Preferably, the user who contracts with the parallel service provider sends a connection request containing a domain name of the parallel service provider to the access point, and the access point determines whether the user contracts with the parallel service provider in accordance with presence or absence of the domain name. The parallel service provider is connected to the plurality of individual service providers through an exclusive line. The plurality of individual service providers send respective user connection recordings to the parallel service provider.

A network connecting method according to the present invention comprises sending a connection request from a user to an access point of any one of a plurality of individual service providers, determining by the access point whether the user is a member of an individual service provider including the access point or a member of a parallel service provider that contracts with the plurality of individual service providers, executing user authentication processing by the access point itself when the user is a member of the individual service provider, and connecting the user to a network in accordance with a result of the authentication processing, and causing the parallel service provider to execute user authentication processing by the access point when the user is a member of the parallel service provider.

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member of the parallel service provider, and connecting the user to the network in accordance with a result of the authentication processing.

Preferably, the user who contracts with the 5 parallel service provider sends a connection request containing a domain name of the parallel service provider to the access point, and the access point determines whether the user contracts with the parallel 10 service provider in accordance with presence or absence of the domain name. The plurality of individual service providers send respective user connection recordings to the parallel service provider.

An electronic mail address determination system according to the present invention, comprises means 15 for, when a user name is input, determining whether an electronic mail address including a combination of the user name and any one of a plurality of predetermined sub-domains has been registered, and means for, when the electronic mail address has been registered, 20 determining an electronic mail address including a combination of the user name and another sub-domain has been registered, whereby setting an electronic mail address including a combination of a sub-domain not registered and a user name.

25 A network connection device according to the present invention comprises means for, when a connection request is issued from a user, determining

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whether the user is a regular member of a provider with which the user contracts or a partnership member under a given contract with the provider, means for, when the user is a regular member, executing user authentication processing and connecting the user to a network in accordance with a result of the authentication processing, and means for, when the user is a partnership member, transferring a connection request to a specified authentication server, and executing user authentication processing and connecting the user to the network in accordance with a result of the authentication processing.

Preferably, the partnership member includes a predetermined domain name in the connection request, and the determining means determines whether the user is the partnership member in accordance with presence or absence of the predetermined domain name in the connection request. The specified authentication server is connected to network connection devices of a plurality of companies and used in common.

Additional objects and advantages of the invention will be set forth in the description which follows, and in part will be obvious from the description, or may be learned by practice of the invention. The objects and advantages of the invention may be realized and obtained by means of the instrumentalities and combinations particularly pointed out hereinafter.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of the specification, illustrate presently preferred embodiments of the invention, and together with the general description given above and the detailed description of the preferred embodiments given below, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

FIG. 1 is a diagram showing a configuration of a prior art Internet system;

FIG. 2 is a diagram showing a mail address of the prior art Internet mail;

FIG. 3 is a diagram showing a configuration of a network system according to one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a diagram showing an example of setting an electronic mail address in the one embodiment of the present invention; and

FIG. 5 is a flowchart showing a flow of processing performed in connecting with the Internet in the one embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Hereinafter a network system according to an embodiment of the present invention will be described.

FIG. 3 illustrates a configuration of the Internet according to the embodiment of the present invention.

Access points (APs) 20A<sub>1</sub>, 20A<sub>2</sub>, ...; 20B<sub>1</sub>, ...;

20C<sub>1</sub>, ... belonging to Internet service providers  
(hereinafter referred to as individual ISPs) 14A, 14B,  
14C, ... are connected to the Internet 12. The access  
points APs have a function of connecting user terminals  
5 50, 52, ... contracting with the ISPs to the Internet  
12 and a roaming function of connecting the user  
terminals 50, 52, ... contracting with a parallel  
Internet service provider (parallel ISP) 16, which will  
be described later, to the Internet 12. The parallel  
10 ISP 16 is the same as the normal ISPs 14A, 14B, ...  
except that it has no access points for connection with  
the Internet. The parallel ISP 16 and normal ISPs 14A,  
14B, ... can be connected to each other by means of the  
15 Internet, but it is preferable that they be connected  
through an exclusive line from a security standpoint.  
The parallel ISP 16 makes a so-called roaming contract  
with the individual ISPs 14A, 14B, .... This contract  
contains an agreement that when a user of the parallel  
ISP 16 uses the access points of the individual ISPs  
20 14A, 14B, ..., the parallel ISP 16 pays the user charge  
instead of the user.

The individual ISPs 14A, 14B, ... include  
an authentication server 22, a mail server 24, an  
accounting server 26, a gateway 28, and a dialup server  
25 30, while the parallel ISP 16 does an authentication  
server 32, a mail server 34, an accounting server 36,  
a gateway 38, a dialup server 40, and a domain name

server (DSN) 42. Though the DSN is also included in the normal ISPs 14A, 14B, ..., it is not shown because it does not directly relate to the operation of the present invention. Each of the servers is not 5 constituted of one computer, but they can be formed of a single computer. Furthermore, the servers are not located in one place but can be arranged at remote sites and connected to one another through an exclusive line. A WWW server 18 for providing a home page is 10 also connected to the Internet 12. The WWW server 18 can be included in the providers.

An operation of the Internet according to the above embodiment will now be described.

When a user makes use of an Internet service, he 15 or she needs to contract with any of providers first. The user can make a contract with the individual ISPs 14A, 14B, 14C, ... as in the case of the prior art; however, the user makes a contract with only the parallel ISP 16 in this embodiment. By contracting 20 with only the parallel ISP 16 as described above, the user can use all access points of the individual ISPs 14A, 14B, 14C, ... with which the parallel ISP 16 is under roaming contract. For the contract with the parallel ISP 16 (online signup), the parallel ISP 16 25 also has access points exclusively for signup, though not shown. The programs for the online signup are sent to respective users by means of a media such as

a CD-ROM. The users perform various settings according to the programs. For example, a user inputs necessary information such as a user name, an address, a telephone number, the name of a personal computer for use, a desired user name, and a bank account. Since this information is personal secret information, it is desirable that a user can choose the Internet or mail to send the information. The signup for the parallel ISP 16 differs from an ordinary line signup in the selection of an individual ISP (one ISP 14A is selected, but it can be changed at any time) to select an access point for use in connecting with the Internet and how to determine an electronic mail address. User information such as a user ID and a password is stored in the authentication server 32.

The determination of an electronic mail address will be described with reference to FIG. 4. As is well-known, an electronic mail address is made up of both a user name (ID) and a domain name. The present invention ensures with a considerably high probability that a user name that a user wishes (usually the full name of the user) can be used as a mail address. In other words, 1296 sub-domains are made up of alphanumerics "00" to "ZZ" under the domain name "PARALLELNET.COM" so as to cope with 1296 duplicate user names. If 1296 sub-domain names are insufficient, the digits of sub-domain names have only to increase to

three to cope with 46656 duplicate user names. If the sub-domain names so increase in digit, it is possible to issue electronic mail addresses including user names that a limitless number of users desire.

5 More specifically, when an electronic mail address is registered with a provider, it is transmitted to the domain name server 42 along with a user name such as "KOJIMA". The domain name server 42 determines whether the electronic mail address adding a domain name  
10 (initial value) "00.PARALLELNET.COM" to the user name "KOJIMA" has been already registered or not. If the mail address "KOJIMA@00.PARALLELNET.COM" has not yet been registered, it is done as an electronic mail address of the user, and the user is notified of this  
15 address.

When the mail address "KOJIMA@00.PARALLELNET.COM" has been already registered in the domain name server 42, the server 42 determines whether an electronic mail address with the next sub-domain name "01.PARALLELNET.COM" has been registered or not. If it has been done, the server 42 repeats the same determination operation for electronic mail addresses with "02.PARALLELNET.COM," "03.PARALLELNET.COM," ... in this order until a unique electronic mail address is  
20 determined. A user sticks to a user name before @ (at sign) but does not care about a domain name after @ too much. With the above sub-domain name, a user does not  
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fail to have an electronic mail address that he or she desires.

Referring to the flowchart shown in FIG. 5, the procedure for connecting a user terminal to the 5 Internet will now be described.

In step S2, a request to connect a user terminal (e.g., 50) to an access point (e.g., 20A<sub>1</sub>) of a selected individual ISP (ISP 14A), is made. This request contains a connection ID and a password.

10 As the connection ID (account), an electronic mail address "KOJIMA@00.PARALLELNET.COM" including a domain name is used, unlike in the normal dialup connection.

15 In step S4, a request (connection ID, password) to connect the access point 20A<sub>1</sub> to the authentication server 22 of the ISP 14A, is transmitted.

20 In step S6, the authentication server 22 determines whether the user is a member of the parallel ISP or not according to whether the connection ID includes a suffix (a domain name "PARALLELNET.COM" in this case). If the connection ID includes no suffix, the user is a regular member of own provider and thus the authentication server 22 authenticates the user (confirms that the password is valid). If the authentication indicates NG, the processing is stopped.

25 If the authentication indicates OK, permission is given to the access point 20A<sub>1</sub> to connect the user terminal 50 thereto in step S10, and the connection of

the user terminal to the Internet is started and so  
is accounting by the accounting server 26. The user  
connected to the Internet 12 gains access to charge or  
free contents, transmits/receives an electronic mail,  
5 and does online shopping. Accounting information such  
as a usage charge of a network and a connection rate  
of connecting with a charge content, is stored in the  
accounting server 26. In step S12, the connection is  
completed, as is the accounting. The accounting  
10 information is usually collected every month, an  
account is issued to a user, and a charge is automatic-  
cally paid from a user's bank account.

If the connection ID includes a suffix, the user  
is not a member of own provider but a member of the  
15 parallel ISP 16 and thus the authentication server 22  
transfers a connection request (connection ID and  
password) to the authentication server 32 of the  
parallel ISP 16. This transfer is encrypted.  
The authentication server 32 of the parallel ISP 16  
20 authenticates a connection request transferred from  
each of the individual ISPs 14A, 14B, 14C, ... and  
returns an authentication result to it.

In step S16, the authentication server 22 of the  
ISP 14A receives the authentication result. If the  
25 result is not good, the processing ends. If it is  
good, permission is given to the access point 20A<sub>1</sub> to  
connect the user terminal 50 thereto in step S18, and

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the connection of the user terminal to the Internet is started and use log data (user, use time, etc.) is recorded in the accounting server 26. If, in step S20, the connection is completed, the use log data is  
5 transferred from the accounting server 26 of the ISP 14A to the accounting server 36 of the parallel ISP 16 in step S22, and the processing ends. As described above, the individual ISPs 14A, 14B, 14C, ... charge not the user but the parallel ISP 16 for the connection  
10 fee.

The accounting server 36 of the parallel ISP 16 sums up the fees of the individual ISPs 14A, 14B, 14C, ..., charges the users for them, and collects money from the users.

15 In step S2, when a user makes a request to connect with an access point, the access point (individual ISP) can freely be varied at all times. If, therefore, there are no access points of the commonly-used ISP near the user when he or she is out or on business, the user can temporarily use an access point of another nearby ISP (which is under roaming contract with the parallel ISP). When the commonly-used ISP access point is busy, the user can also temporarily use another ISP access point. Moreover, the user can choose the  
20 optimum ISP in accordance with the purpose of using the Internet.  
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According to the present invention described

above, if a user simply makes a contract with a single parallel provider which is under roaming contract in advance with a plurality of individual providers, the user can connect to the Internet selectively using 5 access points of a number of individual providers. The user is not at a loss to find an access point everywhere in the world. The individual providers can freely be selected and thus the optimum provider can be selected in accordance with the purpose of using the 10 Internet, the busy condition of lines of the providers, and the like, which is economical. Since, furthermore, the user contracts with only the parallel provider, he or she need not manage a plurality of accounts or a plurality of e-mail addresses but can do the e-mail in 15 a unified manner. In order to avoid the duplicate user names in determining an electronic mail address, a number of sub-domain names are prepared and one of them can be added to a domain name. In most cases, a user can have an electronic mail address including a user 20 name that the user wishes.

The present invention is not limited to the above embodiment described above, but various changes and modifications can be made. For example, the network of the present invention is not limited to the foregoing 25 system.

According to the present invention described above, there can be provided a network system in which

a user is able to connect with a network selectively using access points of a number of Internet service providers only if the user makes a contract with one Internet service provider.

5        According to the present invention, there can be provided an Internet connection apparatus capable of connecting with a network by performing user authentication even at the request of not only a regular user contracting with a provider but also a user contracting  
10      with another provider cooperating with the provider of the regular user.

15      According to the present invention, there can be provided an electronic mail address determination system capable of providing a user with an electronic mail address including a user name as the user wishes.

20      Additional advantages and modifications will readily occur to those skilled in the art. Therefore, the invention in its broader aspects is not limited to the specific details and representative embodiments shown and described herein. Accordingly, various modifications may be made without departing from the spirit or scope of the general inventive concept as defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.

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